**Telephone interview with Donald Lyon, Korean War hospital corpsman with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Present at Chosin Reservoir campaign. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 27 December 2000.**

**Where are you from?**
Pasadena, California.

**When did you join the Navy?**
I joined the Navy in July 1942.

**Did you go to Corps School?**
I went to boot camp in San Diego, Corps School in San Diego, and dental technician school in San Diego.

**So you were a dental tech.**
At that time you were both. In other words, you had to be able to do both things.

**Where was your first assignment out of Corps School?**
Corpus Christi, Texas at the Naval Station. Then I went to Saipan with the Military Government Hospital in 1944 and '45. We took care of civilians, prisoners of war, and native chamoros.

**Did you get out after the war?**
Yes. I got out and joined the reserves in 1949 and was called back for the Korean War in 1950. As a matter of fact, we were on our 2-week summer camp when the Korean War broke out. We got home and then went back to Camp Pendleton about the 1st of August 1950.

**What kind of training did you get there?**
None.

**Didn't they have Field Medical Service School then?**
Yes, they had it but we didn't get it. I was assigned to the 5th Marines on the 9th, and on the 15th boarded the USS *Noble* (AP-218) for Korea. We went to Kobe, Japan first and then changed to the USS *Pickaway* (APA-222) and went to Pusan, South Korea. We arrived there on the 6th of September.

**What did you see when you arrived in Pusan?**
There were great big sheds on the dock and that's where we stayed.

**Did you ever get to see the city of Pusan?**
I went into town one day and wandered around. I can't remember too much about it except for the open gutters with sewage running in them. Even at that time, they were selling souvenirs.

**Did you see a lot of refugees?**
No. At that time there was a lot of people around and you couldn't really tell whether they were refugees or not. I guess there were so many people because they were being forced

down from the north. The [First Provisional] Brigade was still out in the field at that time. And they came back and boarded ship with us. It must have been sometime between the 6th and the 10th. We then departed aboard the USS *Cavalier* (AP-82) on the 13th. Then we made the landing at Inchon on the 15th of September in the late afternoon.

**What do you remember about the landing?**

We sat offshore for some time. This was the harbor with those tremendous tides. We sat in the harbor while they bombarded the shore. In the late afternoon we went ashore. That's when high tide was.

**How did you get ashore?**

In LCVPs.

**And you had to go down a cargo net and had never done that before.**

Never. I was still a young man about 25 so it was no big problem. You had your rifle and your pack, first aid kit, the whole thing.

**You had a rifle with you even though you were a corpsman?**

A carbine and a .45. All corpsmen were issued rifles.

**Do you recall what was in the medical kit?**

Syrettes of morphine, sulfa powders, something for tourniquets, and then battle dressings. It also contained a wallet-like thing with hemostats, scalpels and other instruments. I never used any of the instruments. I had this plus my pack. We left our main gear back in Japan and just packed some underwear, socks, etc.

**Were you under fire at that time?**

It wasn't that highly contested. They had taken Wolmi-do Island the day before and so there wasn't that much. But once we landed there was some intermittent fire and another corpsman and myself were hit on the beach.

**What happened?**

We assume it was a grenade. As we came ashore, we had to climb up a ladder because of the sea wall. Along the beach there was a trench that the North Koreans had used. We ended up in there. There were some North Koreans in there that a couple of Marines had killed. The other fellow and I heard someone yell "Corpsman" so we went out on the beach and treated him. We had just finished that and were lying in the sand starting to get up to go someplace else when we were hit with a grenade. He got most of the shrapnel; I got a little but most of the concussion. I then helped him back to an LST that had landed. The corpsman there treated both of us and we stayed aboard until the next morning.

**Did you actually see the grenade land?**

No.

**Where were you injured?**

I got it on the right side of the arm and the head, and he got it all on his left side. He ended up going back to Japan. The next day we were transferred to the USS *Consolation* (AH-

15). The LST went back out into the harbor and I think they transferred us to the hospital ship by what they call a bosun's chair. That was on the 16th.

**What was your impression of this big white ship?**

I was out of it and don't remember. I was returned to duty on the 24th.

**How were you treated?**

Just like any other patient. I can't remember much of what happened the first few days. The next few days it was just a matter of getting me back to duty because I hadn't been injured that bad. I remember I had to go back to shore in slippers because someone wanted my "boondockers" worse than I did.

**Were you able to save your pack, your carbine, and pistol?**

No, those were also gone. I could have even left the carbine on the beach. I just don't recall.

**Did you end up back in Inchon again?**

Yes. I went to the 1st Marine Division CP (command post) which was there in the Inchon area somewhere. That was on the 24th. And, the next day, I went back to the 5th Marines CP.

**What was your unit?**

I was in the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. That was the same unit as Dr. [Henry] Litvin.

**What did the command post look like?**

It was just tents and in a school they had taken over. The next day I went back to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines during the fight for Seoul. We were at some women's college for the next few days while we were treating the wounded because our outfit was in the process of taking the city. And we had quite a few casualties.

**What was the typical treatment you gave?**

Sulfa and battle dressings. Stop the bleeding.

**Did you have any plasma up there?**

Yes. I can remember giving some plasma. Some of the worst wounded we saw were men who were hit by our own shells--white phosphorus. Those were miserable wounds. We had a young captain with both legs blown off from a white phosphorous shell. He was in a foxhole on our side of the hill and over the hill was the city. I think one of our own shells landed short. That's what they thought.

**How long did you stay at the school?**

We stayed there until the 29th and then we went back to a roadblock just north of Kimpo airfield. We were there about 5 days and then went back to Inchon to a staging area to board ships to go up into North Korea. We boarded the USS *George Clymer* (AP-57) on October 9th and sailed on October 13th..

**What was it like being on that ship?**

Well, we were on there quite a while, much longer than we expected. We got outside the harbor there at Wonsan and they had to clear the mines for a number of days. It was your typical APA--waiting in line for chow. Bunks were four, five, and six high. We were getting sick and tired of being on this ship going nowhere. Of course, it was all anticlimactic because . . . Well when we went ashore on October 27th we were almost met by the Red Cross.

**What did Wonsan look like when you landed?**

I don't ever remember seeing a city at all, nothing. We were on the beach. We landed there on the 27th and must have stayed close to the beach somewhere for a couple of days. Then we acted as some kind of guard for headquarters outside of Wonsan. On October 30th we set up a roadblock somewhere south of the city. In one of these we were in a school. I remember being in a number of different schools used as a headquarters for the battalion. Sometimes we put the aid station up right there since we weren't really under attack at that time.

**Did you notice any difference between what you had witnessed in South Korea as opposed to what you were now seeing in North Korea?**

We did later on when we went to Hungnam or Hamhung. They seemed to have better street lighting, better streets than they did in South Korea, which kind of irritated all of us. We thought the people up there in this communist country were living very well and it seemed like they were living better than the people in the south. I suppose that was because it was an industrial area rather than in the south which was a farming area.

**What about the people? Did they seem friendly or were they hostile?**

They weren't upset that we were there. As a matter of fact, later on when we came back from Chosin, many came with us and boarded the ships and we brought them back. But that was later on.

**So, you ended up marching up north.**

From Wonsan where we were guarding the 10th Corps, on the 2nd of November we boarded a train to go from Wonsan to Hamhung on this little narrow gauge train. We were all on flat cars with people occasionally shooting at us. The next several days after that they lost trains and people going up there. I can't remember that anybody was seriously wounded while we were on the train but I remember it was a heck of a ride. I remember going over a great, big trestle bridge that looked like it wouldn't even hold a train so you sort of held your breath while you went over.

**Did you detrain in Hamhung?**

Yes. We got in there on the 2nd of November and from there we stayed one night then the battalion set up a roadblock about 35 miles north of Hamhung. We had to dig our fox holes there. It was very cold. It was already freezing. We had a 55-gallon barrel, which someone had cut in half lengthwise with an acetylene torch so it made like a bathtub. A few of us corpsmen filled it up with water, built a fire underneath, and took a bath. We washed our clothes afterwards, hung them up, and within a few minutes they were frozen stiff as a board.

**Did you have any idea where you were going?**

No. None. We assumed the whole thing was going to end up at the Yalu River. We didn't run into any enemy at this time at all. We didn't have any wounded or anything. Apparently, we were just out there as a roadblock. Army troops went through us further down the road. I don't know what happened to them. On the 10th and 11th, a couple of us went back to Hamhung--C Medical-- to get some supplies. Then we went back to a new roadblock only about 25 miles north of Hamhung.

**What did these roadblocks look like?**

It was just a spot that other troops could go through knowing the road was secure at least that far. Then we pulled out of there and came back down south and made a right turn up the road to Koto-ri and Hagaru. I think Chesty Puller's outfit was up there receiving some casualties. I remember seeing some burned out trucks. We got to Koto-ri on the 14th of November.

**What did Koto-ri look like?**

I can't really remember too much. We were in an old railroad station, fairly small. Next to it was some kind of underground situation that some of the people were in. It was just sort of shacks, nothing that you are I would consider a city.

**Were there any natives around?**

I didn't see any at that time.

**And it was really cold by then.**

Yes. We had been issued our winter gear by then. We had the shoe pacs.

**Could you describe the shoe pacs?**

It was a rubberized bottom with a leather top. We asked the guys to change their socks as often as they could and then put them next to their body to dry out. The big problem was that you sweated in these boots. Then if you stood around for any time, they would freeze. You need to talk with the corpsmen who were out with the companies. They were on the front line in the foxholes. I and Dr. Litvin were always at the battalion command post.

**What did the command post look like?**

Sometimes we would have a tent; otherwise it might be in a cave, like it was near Seoul. You took the back part of a hill so they couldn't drop a mortar in on you. We didn't even have tents until later on. I remember outside of Hamhung we were in some kind of building that had heat underneath. They'd build a fire under them. I guess that's the way they heated the place. It got so bloody hot in there you couldn't stand it. Basically, we tried to find a building to be in until we got way up north and then it was tents.

**Was that also the aid station?**

That was the aid station. There were usually 2 doctors, and 10 or 12 corpsmen in the aid station.

Anyway, we were in Koto-ri from the 12th to the 14th of November. This is where I separated from the group. I became ill probably from eating that wonderful food.

**What kind of food?**

C-rations. I remember it was spaghetti and meatballs. There must have been a bad one or something. Dr. Litvin put me in one of these jeep ambulances with a driver and we went all the way back this narrow road, just the two of us, at night. They could have popped us off at any time. I was feeling pretty lousy. I got back to the division hospital on the 16th. That was at Hungnam.

**What did they do for you there?**

Basically nothing. Being a corpsman, I just helped myself to something for an upset stomach and diarrhea. There were wounded there and they weren't about to take time with me. I was there 3 days.

**Could you describe the division hospital?**

All I saw was the inside. I went in at night and out at night. I never went out in the daytime.

**Did it have much of a staff?**

Oh, yes. It was a good sized hospital. There were beds all over the place. I remember my bed was out in a hall. I was just there 3 days and then I went to the 1st Marine Division casual company. It was a place where you were ready to go back to duty but they hadn't gotten you there yet. That was in a school in Hungnam. It was a fairly large school. I stayed with that casual company from the 19th until the 23rd, then went to another building. On the 2nd of December I went to the airfield at Hungnam and flew on a C-47 back to Hagaru-ri. We may have been one of the first to land on this strip they had cut out of the frozen ground. As we got up there we had to circle to line up on the runway. Rifle fire went right through the C-47 from the Chinese troops below.

**Bullets were flying right through the plane?**

Right. It was bad enough to have to go back. Down in Hungnam you heard what was going on up north. My battalion was then at Yudam-ni. I thought that I was damn fortunate to be down there. Then, all of a sudden they put me on a plane and sent me back up there. Anyway, we landed on the ice. It must have been a bumpy landing because the strip wasn't all that great. I landed there on the 3rd of December. I worked with the other aid stations. The 11th Marines were there. One of their batteries--either 105s or 155s--I can't remember which. But each gun was pointing in a different direction so you knew pretty much that we were surrounded.

**When you went in on that C-47, who was on the plane with you?**

Just replacements. I was the only corpsman I can recall.

**Were there any nurses?**

No.

**What did it look like when you got off the plane?**

It was a tent city. The big thing I remember was the artillery shooting in four different directions. This was right near the airfield. I went to the aid station and worked with the 11 Marines until the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines came back from Yudam-ni. They got back into

town on the 4th. Nobody had a thermometer so you were estimating. Somebody said it went down to 30 below zero at night. We were always in some kind of building or tent. My battalion was in some type of a house when I rejoined them on the north side of Hagaru.

The next day we moved to the base of East Hill. We were right at the base of East Hill with our aid station tent right next to the road. The morning after the night that was so bad you could see bodies piled up like cord wood where they'd stopped them. We were the rear guard there and were there the 3rd and the 4th, the 5th, and the 6th. I think it was the night of the 6th that we received all the mortar rounds. We were under mortar attack all night with a mortar round coming every few minutes. When we got up in the morning there were many unexploded mortar shells just outside the aid tent. We treated the wounded there but I can't remember what we did with the ones we treated. Some of them may have been taken over to the airfield to be evacuated. Some of the wounded were put outside the tent and covered up so they would not freeze.

**You knew you were in trouble.**

Yes. You didn't have any doubt of that.

**Could you see the Chinese?**

Oh, sure. You could see them on the hillsides and all the way down until we got to Koto-ri, and even south of that. We were rear guard all the way to Koto-ri.

**Can you remember anything at all about treating the wounded?**

It was so damn cold that the bleeding was not a problem. We had some white phosphorus wounded, which was miserable. When you turned the lantern down you could see it glow in the body. We had a solution you put on it to try to neutralize it. We treated so many casualties that I can't remember any individual one.

**Did you get frostbite?**

No. We were in a tent most of the time. We had a pot-bellied heater in the tent. But again, these corpsmen who were out on the hills. . . Our guys who were on East Hill were right out in the weather. Those were the guys who got the frostbite. Those Marines were just fantastic in bringing the wounded out, and the dead. That was really something. I remember all the trucks and ambulances and tanks lining up and going out of Hagaru to Koto-ri. We had wounded strapped to the hoods of the jeeps and everything, any place you could secure them. We were in the main group going out on the road but Dog, Easy, and Fox Companies were out in the hills keeping the Chinese back. They had to come out that way across the hills.

We left on the morning of the 7th to go to Koto-ri and got there about midnight. You'd walk for awhile. That's where you got some of the frostbite because you walked at a pretty good pace and actually had to take off your parka and some of the clothing because you got so warm. And then you'd stop for maybe an hour and put the clothes back on. But, unfortunately, with those shoe pacs, you would sweat and your toes would freeze inside the boot.

Even while we were at Koto-ri, the thought was, if the Chinese really want to stop us, they could. It's hard to believe they had so many people and they couldn't stop us. I have read since that they were under orders to annihilate us.

**What happened at Koto-ri?**

We stayed there in tents. There was no real fighting right where we were. There was no wounded. It was really cold. We had been burning fuel oil in heaters but there we burned gasoline because the fuel oil got so thick it wouldn't flow. With the gasoline, the chimneys would get red-hot and we had to worry about burning the tents down. It got so warm in the tents, the ground would thaw and then we were lying in mud. It wasn't the best place in the world.

We stayed in Koto-ri until the morning of the 10th. Then it was another forced march to where there was a railhead. We again boarded those narrow gage railroad cars pulled by a coal-burning engine with soot coming out. We rode all the way back to Hungnam. We were there for one day, in a big tent city. The only food I can remember during the withdrawal from Chosin was back in Hagaru where they cooked hotcakes for us. We had hotcakes and syrup! I can't remember much about eating any other food during the whole time up there.

We were only there for 1 day. Then we boarded amtracs and went out to the USS *General George M. Randall* (AP115), a big ship, almost like a cruise ship.

**It must have been quite a transition coming out of that miserable situation. What did you think when you saw the ships awaiting you in the harbor?**

It was wonderful. "Thank God they're here."

**How did you get from the amtracs up to the ship?**

Just came up to a boarding ladder and climbed up.

**How did they treat you when you got aboard?**

You stood in line for food, of course. I can't remember the food, but it was great to have it. We were only on the ship for 2 days going down to Pusan. You had 8 hours in a bunk and then someone else took it over.

**Were you in Hungnam when they blew the place up?**

No. We had left.

**What happened when you got to Pusan?**

We boarded a train and went to Masan. We were there almost to the middle of January.

**What were you doing there?**

Just recuperating and rebuilding. They were getting replacements and that sort of thing. Again, it was just a great big tent city. We had a big tent with showers.

**Where did you go from Masan?**

On the 12th of January we boarded a Japanese LST. The crew was Japanese. We went from there on a 1-day trip to a place called Kuryong-po. The next day we went to Pohangdong. Three or 4 days later to a place called Yong-chon. None of this time were we under fire. This was all while we were being refitted. This went on until sometime in mid February and that's when I left the outfit. Shortly after that the unit went back into the line. The reason I was relieved . . . I didn't even have any dogtags over there, no ID card, had never been paid. This was the whole time from September thru February. My wife had never gotten an allotment check. I guess we went so fast they just never caught up with us. So I never got paid the whole time I was in until a week before I was to get out in March. We had written a letter to Richard

Nixon, who was our Senator from Orange County, and through his hard work actually got them to release me. I left Korea on the 18th of February and got back to Treasure Island in California on the 21st of February. I got out on the 1st or 15th of March.

**It's been 50 years since all this happened. Do you have any thoughts about your experiences?**

I guess some irritation that we didn't finish what we started. It is sort of the same feeling when they went over to the Gulf and didn't finish it off. It seemed a big waste that we lost all those people up north and got back to where we originally started.